Snows in Spring

A Look at 5 Years of Hunting During the Northward Migration

By Craig Bihrle

North Dakota has had five spring snow goose seasons, but it only took one to establish a pattern. Unfortunately, it's a pattern of inconsistency.

"Both migration and hunting conditions are weather dependent and will be highly variable from year to year," wrote Mike Johnson, North Dakota Game and Fish Department waterfowl biologist, in his final report on the 1999 season, the first time North Dakotans could hunt migratory waterfowl in spring since the early 1900s.

In four seasons that followed, variability is about the only constant. One year the first noticeable snow geese of the northern migration showed up in late February, the next year it wasn't until late March. One year geese were mostly out of North Dakota and into Canada by the first week in April, in another year North Dakota still had huntable bird numbers in May. Sometimes snow geese arrive and must turn back because winter, having left for a spell, came back for a short encore in late March or early April.

In some years the fields where light geese feed have little snow and dry off quickly as temperatures warm, so hunters can drive vehicles out to deploy large decoy sets. In other years the spring melt is substantial, temporary wetlands and mud prevent vehicle travel in fields and make some gravel roads and section line trails difficult to pass.

That's why the hunter take varied from 35,000 one year to 3,500 the next, and the number of hunters has fluctuated from 6,300 in 1999, to 1,260 in 2001, and back up to 2,300 last year.

The spring light goose season is in some ways like the birds themselves, changing and unpredictable. Over the past several decades snow geese have become a model for avoiding hunting pressure and adapting to evolving conditions in their migration and breeding environments.

"These birds are just masters at capitalizing on a new resource, or being opportunistic and taking advantage of what's out there, avoiding the bad, and taking advantage of the good," Johnson said. "They can change."

A SHORT SNOW GOOSE HISTORY

In the early 1970s, the Mid-Continent Light Goose Population numbered about 1.5 million birds, according to annual mid-December surveys conducted on the birds' wintering grounds. Five years ago, Johnson said that population was estimated at 3 million, and today it's probably still around 2.7 million.

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These are birds that nest in large colonies along the southwestern and western coasts of Hudson Bay, and farther north into the arctic. The population includes white and blue phase snow geese, and Ross's geese, a separate species. They migrate through North Dakota in spring and fall, and winter primarily in southeastern Texas and Louisiana.

In the early 1970s, traditional nesting grounds annually sustained the group nesting effort of those 1.5 million birds. But even then, snow goose behavior was changing.

Larger flocks began using refuges along the northern tier of North Dakota as staging areas in early fall, and waste grain left behind in North Dakota stubble fields became more important as a fall food source. In big bunches, snow geese became harder to hunt. By the early 1980s, the annual snow goose harvest rate in the central United States began to decline.

At the same time, biologists believe an increased over-winter survival and abundant food resources available on their way north gave these geese more energy and helped them arrive at breeding grounds in better shape. Consequently, that led to better reproduction potential.

Over time, with a decreasing hunter take and increasing production, more and more adult snow geese began arriving back at the breeding colonies.

At these colonies, many of which are situated along river deltas, more birds began to create problems. Snow geese, as did Canada geese, evolved as grazing birds. Up until

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human settlement in their migration corridor in the mid-to-late 1800s, their diet was mainly marsh and prairie grasses. Marsh sedges and roots still remain the only food source on their nesting grounds.

Historically, young snow geese would begin eating vegetation shortly after hatching. There was plenty of grass around to meet their needs until they were ready to begin their flight south.

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As the number of breeding birds on nesting grounds increased, competition for grass intensified. Arctic marsh grass doesn't grow as quickly as city lawn grass. Once the blade is clipped, the next bird along might dig into the soft delta mud and eat the roots. It didn't take long before some nesting grounds no longer had enough grass to support the year's crop of young. Adult birds began leading their goslings away from colonies in search of food.

In addition, snow geese aren't the only birds that nest and raise young along grassy arctic river deltas. Some shorebirds, songbirds and ducks depend on these areas as well, and they are beginning to suffer along with snow geese.

As snow goose colonies have grown, so have distances breeding birds will travel to lead their young to food. In some cases, the hike is many miles. For a recently hatched bird, it is a perilous adventure fraught with predators or potential starvation. While more eggs are hatching, the number of birds that live to make their first flight south is alarmingly low.

Johnson, a respected member of several international committees dealing with the snow goose situation, visited a breeding ground on the west coast of Hudson Bay in early June 2002. Photographs and written descriptions just don't do justice to the condition of formerly productive snow goose breeding grounds.

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Johnson described one native delta plant that historically would provide food for young snow geese. "All we could find were shards of it laying on the ground. We spent a week before we could actually find one coming out of the ground … adult birds moving through in the spring just cleaned it all off."

But the snow goose's tenacity for survival is evident. Faced with a breeding ground essentially void of grasses for nests or food, many birds are building nests in willows and conifers bordering the delta flatlands. "They're moving back into places they've never used before," Johnson said.

Because of this, nest success remains high. That doesn't equate to better survival of young because most goslings, at least on this breeding ground, still die en route to someplace where they can eat.

THE SPRING CONSERVATION ORDER

The condition of the breeding grounds is the primary reason North Dakota and many other states are able to allow hunting in spring. More officially called a conservation order, spring snow goose hunting is designed to help reduce the Mid-Continent Light Goose Population to a level where the breeding grounds could start the regeneration

A formerly productive snow goose breeding ground at LaPerouse Bay, off the southwestern coast of Hudson Bay, is now a denuded mud flat. Recently hatched goslings are marched for miles before they can find grass to eat.

Mike Johnson

process. Because of its special and urgent nature, participants or hunters can use tactics that are not otherwise allowed during regular waterfowl seasons. These include electronic calls, shooting until one-half hour after sunset, and more than three shells in a shotgun.

So far, after five years, progress is noted. "We've kind of leveled the population off," Johnson said, "but we haven't seen any decline, and of course, what we're looking for is recovery on the breeding grounds. We're a long ways from that."

While North Dakota's contribution to the spring harvest has been minimal the past three years, other states have picked up the slack. South Dakota and Nebraska have become primary spring harvest states, if for no other reason than the geese stack up there waiting for snow and ice to leave North Dakota, or the northern part of South Dakota.

For example, hunters in South Dakota killed 70,000 light geese in 2003 and 90,000 in 2002. North Dakota hunters killed 6,400 birds in 2002 and 12,300 in 2003, well below the high harvest of nearly 36,000 in 2000.

For all states that authorize a light goose conservation order, the spring harvest has increased substantially since the first one in 1999. In that year, hunters bagged 341,000 light geese during the conservation order. Add in the 1998-99 regular and special seasons and the total U.S. light goose take was about 1.07 million birds.

During the same period in 1999-2000, the U.S. harvest was about 1.4 million birds, and that's close to the target set by an international work group in which Johnson participates. "We said in our report, if we could harvest 1.2 to 1.4 million birds annually, we could start seeing that population get turned around."

That overall harvest has remained relatively stable since 2000, but hunters are starting to kill more birds in the spring and fewer during regular fall and winter seasons. For instance, the North American light goose harvest during the conservation order in 2003 was about 653,000, according to U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service estimates. The total snow goose kill in 2002-03, the last season for which complete statistics are available, was about 1.3 million birds. "In some places they are getting lots of birds in the spring," Johnson noted. "The (spring) harvest has gone up dramatically since we've implemented all these special regulations."

IMPROVING SPRING SUCCESS

While the conservation order has served to halt snow goose population growth, it will take a greater effort to reduce overall numbers to a level that allows breeding ground recovery. One of the challenges, at least in North Dakota, is figuring out how to get one step ahead of these birds' ability to avoid hunters.

It's not an easy business, even with advantages such as electronic calls and extended shooting hours. The key word for many successful spring snow goose hunters is flexibility – in hunting methods, location and timing.

Timing is especially important because in spring, light geese are often here today, gone tomorrow. When they're here, and when they leave varies greatly from year to year.

It's a bit of a change from the traditional fall snow goose migration when birds would start filtering into the state by early October and build to an impressive peak toward the end of that month. While this fall migration *pattern* is changing, and more and more snow geese are staging in Canada instead of North Dakota for much of October, the migration *timing* is still similar.

Not so in spring, when geese follow the snow line and open water from Nebraska, into South Dakota and then North Dakota. Weather influences that arrival date, and over the past five years, the first snow goose sightings have varied by more than a month. For instance, in 2000 reports of snow geese in southeastern North Dakota started filtering in on February 27. The following year, significant flocks were not reported until March 29.

In 2000 the peak harvest occurred from March 20-27, and the last reports of snow geese in the state came on April 6. In 2001 the peak harvest was April 7-14, and the last reported snow goose harvest was on May 5.

Even when timing is perfect, standard fall hunting regimens don't always work. The traditional method – scouting feeding flocks in the afternoon, securing access to a field and setting up a large decoy spread in that same field the next morning – is still popular. "Decoys with electronic calls are being used successfully," says Mark Pollert, district game warden at LaMoure, whose region contains the top two counties (Dickey and LaMoure) for spring snow goose harvest. "But it seems the birds are getting wiser to the decoys and calls as well."

And that's where the flexibility comes in. Warden Tim Phalen, Wyndmere, patrols the district just east of Pollert in southeastern North Dakota, another area where snow geese are typically first reported venturing across the border from South Dakota. The people who have success with decoys and calls, Phalen counsels, are typically not setting up in the same field where they saw geese the night before.

Some hunters will locate flocks on the ground in the morning, then look for a place to make a decoy stand a mile or more to the north, especially on days with south winds. Since spring snow geese often keep leapfrogging north, instead of feeding and roosting in the same area for several days, intercepting them on their daily migration path can work well.

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Same goes for watching goose flocks as the sun goes down. In spring, light geese sometimes stage on large bodies of water, standing on the ice because large lakes are not usually ice free this time of year. But more often they'll spend the night in a temporary or more permanent wetland in a muddy crop field, then start feeding northward when the sun comes up. Hunters who make their sets north of where goose flocks bed down for the night, Phalen indicated, may put themselves in an active flight line.

Some successful hunters Phalen observes use several electronic calls, and small decoy sets can work as well or better than large decoy sets. This is especially an advantage when fields are wet, vehicle travel is not advised, and hunters must carry decoy sacks on their backs.

While LaMoure and Dickey counties have attracted the most spring snow goose hunting activity, large flocks of these birds can show up just about anywhere in the state. One year the main migration corridor was through the middle of the state, rather than in the east, because eastern North Dakota had more snow.

In years when the migration through North Dakota starts late, like 2001, the geese are

antsy. The first wave didn't just inch into the state, they blew through from South Dakota on a warm south wind. Within days of the first major movement many birds were already reported in southern Canada.

"Flocks can show up anywhere, anytime, but they're usually only around for a few days," Johnson said. "You have to be opportunistic."

The epitome of opportunistic – or inventive, perhaps – is the well-worn story of hunters in Nebraska using a cow silhouette to hide behind as they put the sneak on feeding flocks of geese. Greg Gullickson, a Game and Fish outreach biologist in Minot, tried the cow silhouette during North Dakota's first spring season.

"The cow decoy was one of those methods that you hear people are using in Southern states and I figured I would give it a try," Gullickson recalled. "It never worked that well and I gave it up after a half-dozen stares from farmers driving by and scratching their heads."

Gullickson has hunted all five seasons. Early on, he says, one of the best assets was the hunting hours that extended to one-half hour after sunset. Sunrise and sunset are still the most important times to hunt, Gullickson noted, but "Electronic calls in the last few spring seasons don't seem to have that magic effect they did in the first years, and decoys seem to be less attractive."

Gullickson also had these observations: "In the past few years, hunting pressure is down in the spring. You run into fewer people and see fewer decoy spreads in the field. I don't know if it's the mud, muck and harder work required to hunt spring snows. It's one of those seasons you are bound to get dirty. Most of the time you are in waders or rain

MIGRATION HOTLINE ACTIVATED

Though the state's spring light goose season opened Feb. 21, hunters probably won't see birds migrating into North Dakota until well into March.

When geese do start moving into the region, Game and Fish will again provide hunters with migration updates. Hunters can call 701-328-3697 to hear recorded information 24 hours a day until the season ends or geese have left the state. The hotline will be updated several times each week.

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gear and you better have a cover over your seat and some good floor mats.

"Landowners have been really good when asked for permission. One of the other things is rutting up section lines and county roads. You have to use some common sense and make sure not to tear things up.

"However, with the apparent change in fall migration I still think that spring season snow goose hunting is better than the fall."

While it might be days or weeks before the first white geese of spring cross into North Dakota, maybe this is the year when the weather factors line up, birds follow a slowly receding snow line from south to north, and hunters get a better chance to participate in this important conservation issue.

After five years progress is evident, but much work remains if the light goose breeding grounds are going to have a chance to recover.

CRAIG BIHRLE is the Game and Fish Department's communications supervisor.

2004 SEASON DETAILS

North Dakota's spring light goose season opened February 21, but at that time, the nearest snow goose was at least two states away. Based on snow conditions in North Dakota and South Dakota in late February, it appears the 2004 migration could run late, and fields will be wet because of normal snowfall throughout much of the state.

Once light geese arrive, the following regulations apply:

- The season runs through May 11.
- Shooting hours are from one-half hour before sunrise to one-half hour after sunset.
- Light geese include snow geese, both white and blue phases, and Ross's geese.
- The entire state is open.
- Electronic and recorded calls, as well as shotguns capable of holding more than three shells, may be used to take light geese during this season.
- Non-toxic shot is required for hunting all light geese statewide.
- No waterfowl rest areas are designated for the spring season. Hunters should note that private land within waterfowl rest areas closed last fall may be posted closed to hunting.
- There is no daily bag limit or possession limit.
- Residents need either the following 2003-04 or 2004-05 licenses: hunting, fishing, and furbearer certificate, small game license, and a general game and habitat license; or a sportsmen's license. 2004-05 licenses are currently available only from the Game and Fish Department's Bismarck office, the Department's website at www.discovernd.com/gnf, or by calling 800-406-6409.
- Nonresidents need a 2004 spring light goose season license. The cost is $50 and the license is good statewide (zones do not apply to the spring season). Licenses are available at the Department's Bismarck office or website, and by calling 800-406-6409. Nonresidents who hunt the spring season remain eligible to buy a fall season license. The spring season does not count against the 14-day fall restriction.
- A federal duck stamp is not required of either residents or nonresidents.
- All 2004 spring goose hunters must register with the Harvest Information Program; call toll-free, 888-634-4798; or, hunters purchasing a 2004-05 license from the Department's office or website, as well as the 800-406-6409 number, will receive a HIP number at that time. Hunters who were HIP registered in fall 2003 must register again for the spring light goose season, but this HIP number is good for the fall season as well, so spring hunters should save it to record on their fall license.
- Driving off established roads and trails is strongly discouraged during this hunt because of the likelihood of soft, muddy conditions.
- Regulations are available at county auditors, Game and Fish offices and license vendors. A waterfowl identification booklet can be obtained by contacting the North Dakota Game and Fish Department, 100 N. Bismarck Expressway, Bismarck, ND 58501-5095 or call 701-328-6300.